

Encyclopedic Entry

food staple

staple food

For the complete encyclopedic entry with media resources, visit:
<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/encyclopedia/food-staple/>

A **food staple** is a food that makes up the **dominant** part of a population's **diet**. Food staples are eaten regularly—even daily—and supply a major proportion of a person's **energy** and **nutritional** needs.

Food staples vary from place to place, depending on the **food** sources available. Most food staples are **inexpensive**, plant-based foods. They are usually full of **calories** for energy. **Cereal** grains and **tubers** are the most common food staples.

There are more than 50,000 **edible** plants in the world, but just 15 of them provide 90 percent of the world's food energy intake. **Rice**, **corn** (**maize**), and **wheat** make up two-thirds of this. Other food staples include **millet** and **sorghum**; tubers such as potatoes, **cassava**, **yams**, and **taro**; and animal products such as meat, fish, and **dairy**.

Food staples traditionally depend on what plants are native to a region. However, with improvements in **agriculture**, food storage, and **transportation**, some food staples are changing. For example, in the islands of the South Pacific, roots and tubers such as taro are traditional food staples. Since 1970, however, their **consumption** has fallen, while consumption of cereal grains not native to **tropical** islands has increased by about 40 percent.

Foods that were particular to one region are becoming popular in regions where they don't traditionally grow. **Quinoa**, for instance, is a grain-like plant that is grown high in the Andes Mountains of South America. Today, quinoa is popular far outside of Latin America.

Although staple foods are nutritious, they do not provide the full, healthy range of **nutrients**. People must add other foods to their diets to avoid **malnutrition**.

Rice

Rice is a food staple for more than 1.6 billion people around the world, particularly in Asia, Latin America, and parts of Africa. Rice has been **cultivated** in Asia for thousands of years. Scientists believe people first **domesticated** rice in India or Southeast Asia. Rice arrived in Japan in about 100 BCE. The Portuguese most likely introduced it into South America in the 16th century.

Today, the world's largest rice producers are China, India, and Indonesia. Outside of Asia, Brazil is the largest rice producer. Rice grows in warm, wet **climates**. It thrives in **waterlogged** soil, such as in the **flood plains** of Asian rivers such as the Ganges and the Mekong. "**Floating rice**" is a variety of rice that is **adapted** to deep flooding, and is grown in eastern Pakistan, Vietnam, and Burma.

Corn (Maize)

Corn, known outside the United States as maize, is native to Central America, where it was domesticated by the [Aztecs](#) and [Mayans](#). Corn remains the most widely grown crop in the Americas today. The United States is the world's largest corn grower, producing more than 40 percent of the world's corn. China, Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina also produce large amounts of corn.

Corn is used in a variety of ways, and can be stored relatively easily. This is why it is such a popular food staple.

Dried, ground corn is called [cornmeal](#). Many cultures make porridge out of cornmeal, including [polenta](#) in Italy and [sadza](#) in Zimbabwe. Cornmeal is also used to make cornbread, or treated with [limewater](#) to make [masa](#), the main ingredient in [tortillas](#).

Corn kernels can be soaked in [lye](#) to produce [hominy](#). [Coarsely](#) ground hominy is used to make [grits](#), a popular food in the southeastern United States. Grits are a popular breakfast food, as are corn flakes and other cereals made from corn. Brazilians make a dessert called [canjica](#) by boiling corn kernels in sweetened milk.

In the Americas and the United Kingdom, many people like to boil, grill, or roast whole ears of corn and simply eat the kernels off the [cob](#). Cooked kernels may also be removed from the cob and served as a [vegetable](#). Certain varieties of corn kernels, when dried, will explode when heated, producing popcorn.

Corn is also used to produce corn oil, sweeteners such as corn syrup, and [cornstarch](#), which is used as a sweetener and thickening agent in home cooking and processed food products. [Alcohol](#) from [fermented](#) corn is the source of [bourbon whiskey](#).

Wheat

Wheat was first domesticated in the Middle East, in the area known as the Cradle of Civilization near what is now Iraq. Domesticating this [reliable](#), [versatile](#) staple food was key to the development of agriculture.

Wheat grows well in [temperate](#) climates, even those with a short [growing season](#). Today, the largest wheat producers are China, India, the United States, Russia, and France.

The majority of breads are made with wheat flour. Wheat flour is also used in pasta, pastries, crackers, breakfast cereals, and noodles. Starting in the 19th century, wheat joined corn as a popular ingredient for making tortillas. Wheat can be crushed into [bulgur](#), which has a high nutritional value and is often used in soups and pastries in the Middle East.

Roots and Tubers

In addition to cereal grains, roots and tubers are common food staples, particularly in tropical regions. Yams are an important food in the [rain forests](#) of West Africa. They are most commonly peeled, boiled, and pounded into a pulp to make a dough called [fufu](#).

Cassava, also known as [manioc](#), is a food staple for more than 500 million people. This tuber originated in the Amazon rain forest of South America, and was introduced into West Africa in the 16th century. Now, cassava is important to the diets of many people in [Latin America](#) and Africa.

Taro is a staple food on some of the Pacific islands, such as Hawaii, Fiji, and New Caledonia, and also in West Africa. The Hawaiian national dish, [poi](#), is a thick paste made from taro that has been boiled, mashed, and fermented.

Potatoes are native to the cold climate of the Andes Mountains. They were the food staple of the **Inca** Empire in the 15th and 16th centuries. Introduced to Europe by explorers of the 16th century, potatoes are now a food staple in Europe and parts of the Americas. The leading potato producers are China, Russia, India, the United States, and Ukraine.

Other Food Staples

Although cereal grains and tubers make up the majority of the world's food staples, they are not the only dominant foods in the world. The **Maasai** of Kenya and Tanzania have traditionally relied on food provided by **cattle** for the majority of their diet. Milk, meat, and blood are traditional ingredients in Maasai diets. Today, **grain** has become a staple food of the Maasai, but they still drink large quantities of milk—about 1 liter per person per day.

Cultures **indigenous** to **polar** climates, where fresh fruits and vegetables are scarce, rely on meat and fish as food staples. Often, **seafood** provides the majority of their energy and nutrient needs. For example, Eskimo tribes of Alaska and northern Canada have traditionally eaten seal, walrus, and whale meat in addition to many kinds of fish.

In tropical climates, people often rely on **starchy** fruits such as plantains and breadfruit. In parts of Africa and Asia, especially India, **legumes** such as beans, **lentils**, and chickpeas are staple foods.

VOCABULARY

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
adapt	<i>verb</i>	to adjust to new surroundings or a new situation.
agriculture	<i>noun</i>	the art and science of cultivating the land for growing crops (farming) or raising livestock (ranching).
alcohol	<i>noun</i>	chemical compound, usually ethanol or methanol, generated by fermentation and used for fuel, hygiene, medicine, and food.
Aztec	<i>noun</i>	people and culture native to Mexico and Central America.
bourbon	<i>noun</i>	variety of alcohol (whiskey) made from a grain mixture that is at least 51 percent corn.
bulgur	<i>noun</i>	wheat that has been boiled and dried.
calorie	<i>noun</i>	unit of energy from food, equal to the amount of heat required to raise the temperature of one kilogram of water by one degree Celsius.
canjica	<i>noun</i>	Brazilian dessert made with crushed corn kernels and sweetened milk or coconut milk.
cassava	<i>noun</i>	tuber originally native to South America. Also called manioc or yuca.
cattle	<i>noun</i>	cows and oxen.
cereal	<i>noun</i>	type of grain, including wheat.
climate	<i>noun</i>	all weather conditions for a given location over a period of time.
coarse	<i>adjective</i>	rough or composed of large, jagged particles.
cob	<i>noun</i>	thick, inedible core of corn in which kernels are embedded.
consumption	<i>noun</i>	process of using goods and services.

corn	<i>noun, adjective</i>	tall cereal plant with large seeds (kernels) cultivated for food and industry. Also called maize.
cornmeal	<i>noun</i>	thick powder made from ground corn.
cornstarch	<i>noun</i>	flour made from corn, often used as a sweetener or thickener for foods. Also called corn flour.
cultivate	<i>verb</i>	to prepare and nurture the land for crops.
dairy	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with the production of milk, cream, butter, or cheese.
diet	<i>noun</i>	foods eaten by a specific group of people or other organisms.
domesticate	<i>verb</i>	to tame or adapt for human use.
dominant	<i>adjective</i>	main or most important.
edible	<i>adjective</i>	able to be eaten and digested.
energy	<i>noun</i>	capacity to do work.
Eskimo	<i>noun</i>	people and culture native to the Arctic region of eastern Russia, the U.S. state of Alaska, Canada, and Greenland.
ferment	<i>verb</i>	to undergo the natural or artificial process of fermentation, or changing a food's sugars into alcohols.
floating rice	<i>noun</i>	variety of rice that can grow in flooded fields. Also called deep water rice.
flood	<i>verb</i>	to overflow or cover in water or another liquid.
flood plain	<i>noun</i>	flat area alongside a stream or river that is subject to flooding.
food	<i>noun</i>	material, usually of plant or animal origin, that living organisms use to obtain nutrients.
food staple	<i>noun</i>	food that is eaten frequently, either fresh or stored for use all year.
fufu	<i>noun</i>	West African food staple made by boiling and pounding starchy root vegetables into a thick paste.
grain	<i>noun</i>	harvested seed of such grasses as wheat, oats, and rice.
grits	<i>plural noun</i>	ground hominy, often eaten boiled or fried.
growing season	<i>noun</i>	period in the year when crops and other plants grow rapidly.
hominy	<i>noun</i>	kernels of corn with the husks and seed germ removed.
Inca	<i>noun</i>	people and culture native to the Andes Mountains and Pacific coast of South America.
indigenous	<i>adjective</i>	native to or characteristic of a specific place.
inexpensive	<i>adjective</i>	not costing a lot of money.
island	<i>noun</i>	body of land surrounded by water.
Latin America	<i>noun</i>	South America, Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico.
legume	<i>noun</i>	type of plant with a pod that splits, with seeds in the middle, such as peanuts.
limewater	<i>noun</i>	water that has been treated with calcium hydroxide, or lime.

lye	<i>noun</i>	toxic chemical, usually potassium hydroxide or sodium hydroxide, used as a bleaching or cleaning agent.
Maasai	<i>noun</i>	people and culture native to eastern Africa.
maize	<i>noun</i>	corn.
malnutrition	<i>noun</i>	lack of a balanced diet.
manioc	<i>noun</i>	root plant originally native to South America. Also called cassava.
masa	<i>noun</i>	dough made from dried corn or wheat flour, used in making tortillas.
Maya	<i>noun</i>	people and culture native to southeastern Mexico and Central America.
millet	<i>noun, adjective</i>	a type of grain.
nutrient	<i>noun</i>	substance an organism needs for energy, growth, and life.
nutrition	<i>noun</i>	process by which living organisms obtain food or nutrients, and use it for growth.
poi	<i>noun</i>	national dish of Hawaii, made with cooked and fermented taro.
polar	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with the North and/or South Pole.
polenta	<i>noun</i>	thick, boiled cornmeal common in Italian cooking.
porridge	<i>noun</i>	thick, pasty soup made from boiled cereals or beans.
quinoa	<i>noun</i>	grain-like plant with seeds that are cooked and eaten as a food staple in South America.
rain forest	<i>noun</i>	area of tall, mostly evergreen trees and a high amount of rainfall.
reliable	<i>adjective</i>	dependable or consistent.
rice	<i>noun</i>	grass cultivated for its seeds.
sadza	<i>noun</i>	thick, cooked cornmeal eaten as a food staple in Zimbabwe.
seafood	<i>noun</i>	fish and shellfish consumed by humans.
sorghum	<i>noun</i>	type of grain.
starch	<i>noun</i>	carbohydrate found in many vegetables and cereals.
taro	<i>noun</i>	type of tuber vegetable. Also called dasheen and cocoyam.
temperate	<i>adjective</i>	moderate.
tortilla	<i>noun</i>	flat, round bread made from corn or flour.
transportation	<i>noun</i>	movement of people or goods from one place to another.
tropical	<i>adjective</i>	existing in the tropics, the latitudes between the Tropic of Cancer in the north and the Tropic of Capricorn in the south.
tuber	<i>noun</i>	thick part of an underground stem of a plant, such as a potato.
vegetable	<i>noun</i>	plant that is grown or harvested for food.
versatile	<i>adjective</i>	able to adjust to different conditions.
waterlogged	<i>adjective</i>	flooded or overflowing with water.
wheat	<i>noun</i>	most widely grown cereal in the world.

whiskey	<i>noun</i>	alcoholic beverage made from grain.
yam	<i>noun</i>	type of plant with an edible root.

For Further Exploration

Websites

- Appalachian Staple Foods Cooperative
- Food and Agriculture Organization: Staple Foods—What Do People Eat?



© 1996–2015 National Geographic Society. All rights reserved.